

Success Stories

To Serve and Protect – March 2007

In his five short but action-packed years in Canada, Shen has gone from a computer programming masters student at Dalhousie University to a constable with the Toronto Police Service. In between, he got married, his wife had a baby son, he became a Canadian citizen and he ran his own business.

While his career path is not exactly what he had mapped out when he came to Canada in 2001, Shen is happy with the way things have turned out.

“I ended my studies when my wife became pregnant in 2003,” he says. “I did everything I could – delivering pizzas and working as a security guard, trying to get my own business off the ground as well. It might not have been the way I planned things, but it was what I needed to do.”

The idea of becoming a police officer came from a commercial on a Chinese-language television station, and Shen was drawn to the “serve and protect” mission of the Toronto Police Service.

“It was a call for Chinese civilians who might be interested in serving on the Toronto Police Force. The more I thought about it, the more it made sense. My parents were in the military, so I was familiar with some of that kind of life, and I knew there would be respect for this kind of job.”

Graduating from the Ontario Police College in May 2006, and becoming a Canadian citizen in June 2006, Constable Shen is now hard at work in his new career and very happy with his decision.

“Certainly my language comes in handy,” he says. “I’ve been called in to translate in some situations, and in another I was able to help a woman who had witnessed a crime but she only spoke Chinese. She was very glad I was there, and I was happy to be able to help her.”

Both Constable Shen and his wife understand service to the public. His wife, who came to Canada in 1998, is a nurse in Toronto. Their three-and-a-half-year-old son is thriving, and a secure career path is ahead for the couple.

“I have had some changes in my life, that is certain,” Constable Shen says. “But I am now a police officer in Canada – someone whose first language is not English – and I have learned in a short time what it means to serve and protect. I am serving other Chinese Canadians and the City of Toronto all at the same time.”

The Toronto Police Service has hired a number of minority recruits, and at the division where Constable Shen is stationed, 96 of the officers speak a total of 29 languages.

A former Lost Boy helps others to find their way – January 2008

Although he was a “Lost Boy” when growing up in the Sudan, William has both found his way to a new home in Canada and is helping others to do the same.

When he was just nine years old, William fled from his home in South Sudan to avoid being killed or abducted by troops in the country’s civil war.

He was one of the approximately 20,000 “Lost Boys of Sudan,” young men forced to look after themselves without parents or guardians as they walked through the African wilderness. Many were shot by soldiers and others died from starvation, dehydration and disease.

William walked for months to reach refugee camps, first in Ethiopia and later, Kenya. He became a social worker in the camps and, after meeting a representative of the Canadian embassy, applied and was accepted to move to Canada as a refugee in 1998.

“With all of the people Canada was taking, they hired buses to take us to Nairobi and gave us an orientation class on Canada so that I had an idea of what life was like here,” he says.

Even so, when William arrived in Vancouver that July, the 22 year-old was struck by the change in climate, feeling as if he was, “freezing in the middle of the summer.”

Three years after he arrived, William became a Canadian citizen and today, he is a maintenance worker at the Metropolis at Metrotown shopping centre in Burnaby, B.C.

William has embraced his new home and job and is helping other Sudanese people who come to Vancouver. He is working to establish a community centre for the African immigrants in Vancouver and is also helping to run a tutoring program for students from Sudanese families, many whose parents lack education in Canada.

“I remember when I was their age,” says William. “I know what it is like to be on your own.”

Last year, William returned to the village in South Sudan that he fled, finding the parents he hadn’t seen or spoken to for more than 20 years.

“Going home was a bit of a shock,” he says of the reunion. “At first, my parents didn’t recognize me after 20 years and thought I was a U.N. worker. It was a very touching moment.”

It also took place just in time. Two months after his visit, William’s father passed away.

The trip inspired William to start raising funds to build a well for his village. The project will cost roughly \$12,000 and he is aiming to undertake it with a visit in 2008.

“Of all these problems I witnessed, water stood out as the biggest and more pressing matter” he says. “People are still drinking dirty and contaminated water from local rivers and water pools. As a result, people are getting sick and many of them die.”

Information about the project is at www.givemeaning.com/project/southsudanwell.

From Tehran to St. John's – September 2008

It's a long way from Tehran to St. John's, but Sepideh is glad she made the trip.

The Iranian-born-and-trained physician immigrated to Canada with her husband and young daughter in the summer of 2002. Sepideh says they left behind a good life.

"I'd been practising medicine for five years. My husband had a good job. We were successful, but we wanted something better for our daughter—a place where we wouldn't have to worry about bombs being dropped on our heads."

They settled in Toronto, and while Sepideh says they enjoyed being part of the city's active Iranian community, she is candid about the family's difficulties.

"We didn't speak English very well and our savings ran out within a couple of months. Since we came from Iran, no one here knew anything about our qualifications and we had to take any work we could find just to survive."

Sepideh's husband, with a master's degree in chemistry, worked as a labourer. She went from one medical office to another, searching for work.

"I would have taken anything in the medical field, a clerk's job, anything," she says. "I couldn't even get a job as volunteer!"

While she looked for work, Sepideh took classes to improve her English, and eventually found a job as a cashier in a drug store. Although this helped her family's finances and gave her a chance to work on her language skills, her health was suffering.

That's when things started to change. When she visited a doctor and described her symptoms with precise medical terminology, Sepideh was asked by the doctor if she was a nurse.

"As soon as I said I was a doctor, he said he knew exactly what was wrong with me," says Sepideh, noting that the physician told her that stress was affecting her health because she lacked a way to put her training into practice.

An immigrant to Canada himself, the doctor pointed Sepideh to a special licensing program at the University of Toronto. She was accepted into the program in 2003 and completed the program over the next four years.

Today, Sepideh and her family have moved to St. John's, where she is now practising medicine.

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“It was hard, especially for my husband, who worked all those years at survival jobs to support us while I was training,” she says. “But now my husband is working on his PhD at Memorial University, I have a busy practice, and our daughter is doing well.”

Sepideh is unsure about what the future may hold and says it could depend on where her husband is able to find work after he finishes his PhD.

“I sometimes miss big-city life,” she adds, “although we went back to Toronto last year and it seemed so big and crowded and busy. St. John’s is so relaxed and friendly, and I’m only ten minutes from anywhere I need to be.”

Wherever they settle, this time, it will be as Canadians. In 2007, Sepideh, her husband and daughter all became Canadian citizens.

“It’s like a Cinderella story,” she says. “We went from mopping floors to being flown to Ottawa for the 60th anniversary of Canadian citizenship. We got our certificates from the Governor General.”

“I can’t describe how wonderful I felt that day, and how good it feels to have the freedom of being a Canadian.”

Building a new life, one cup at a time – January 2008

Martha sees herself as a warrior.

“We are fighters,” she says of herself and her husband, Frank. “You try to think that nothing is going to bring you down. As immigrants, we feel it’s a privilege to be here and we want to prove we can make it.”

Martha immigrated from Columbia in 1998 and is now the owner of Latin Organics Inc., a fair trade, organic coffee company that sells specialty coffee beans in several Vancouver area stores. She and her husband came to Canada as landed immigrants – now known as permanent residents – in a bid to find a better life for their family.

Earlier that year, kidnappers had taken them and their young daughter captive, and held Frank until he was rescued by a military convoy. Their decision was also influenced by a robbery at Frank’s restaurant in which a person died and others were injured.

Concluding that Canada was a country where they could raise their children in safety, Martha and her husband followed a suggestion from her mother to visit Vancouver. They spent three weeks there, mostly doing research at the Vancouver Public Library.

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After travelling back to Colombia to retrieve their children, they rented a small house in North Vancouver, a community they felt was affordable and also suitable for children.

“When we moved into the house and our furniture and personal belongings arrived, we opened up an antique trunk with all our family photos,” she says. “As we looked through the family albums, I felt as though we had just made a big and irreversible mistake and we cried about it. We were facing an ocean of uncertainty.”

It was an ocean, however, that they learned to navigate.

While her husband travelled back to Columbia to wrap up business interests there, Martha’s parents visited to help her settle in. After finding work at the Hotel Vancouver, she moved on to be a manager with Capers Community Market, a local speciality and organic food retailer – owned by an American corporation.

“I never knew I had the potential to be an entrepreneur,” she says. “My husband had always said I could do it but I had to change my mindset. In Columbia, I thought that you were successful if you went to work for a large corporation and moved up the ladder.”

Partly to find work closer to her children, Martha drew on her experience observing how organic food products were sold and marketed to food retailers. Obtaining a list of coffee producers in her homeland, she discovered that coffee was being produced by the Arhuaco Indians, people there with whom her grandfather had done business.

“I went to Columbia, met with the farmers and got all the information I could. Once back in Vancouver, I spent every day I had off from work, to write a business plan.”

With a loan from the federal Business Development Bank of Canada, Martha launched operations for Latin Organics in November, 2005. While the business has grown, it was not an easy start.

“I had my daughter just as I was marketing my first coffee beans. That was a huge challenge. My belly was growing and I was visiting vendors to find accounts.”

Until Latin Organics grows enough to hire him as part of its team, Martha’s husband Frank works as a car salesman. Martha also imports and sells hand-woven placemats and baskets made by Colombia’s Kankuamo Indians at a local gallery in West Vancouver.

As well, Martha, her husband and children are now all Canadian citizens, something in which she takes pride.

“This is one of the only decent countries left in the world,” she says of Canada’s healthcare, education, environment and the safety for its citizens. “I hope the government understands this and is careful with the process it uses to select who can come here.”

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"We believe citizenship is a privilege and we don't take it for granted. We honour it through our hard work"

That hard work will include another new venture for Martha in 2008, when she plans to open a new cafe and coffee roaster.

It will be called Latin Organics Café Tienda & Roastery.

Fawad: Journey to Canada – A Refugee's Story (Fawad Popalyar) – March 2011

In 1992, Fawad Popalyar's father was faced with a life-changing choice and had only seconds to decide. A businessman by trade, he had received word from friends that fighting was going to break out near his home in Kabul, Afghanistan. Should he uproot his entire family based on a rumour, or continue on with his day?

Luckily for Fawad and his siblings, his dad chose to send them to his cousin's house on the other side of the city. That night, Fawad's house was hit by five missiles. The attack solidified a difficult decision—they would have to flee Afghanistan and head for the closest safe locale, Peshawar, Pakistan – at least until the fighting subsided.

Ten hours later, they arrived at the border where guards were painstakingly searching every vehicle. A small child ran up alongside the car asking for money in exchange for carrying their luggage across the border. As people who had just abandoned their homes, Fawad and his family did not have much money to spare. However, the child persisted and they gave him 50 rupees (approximately one dollar). The child then ran over to the security guard and gave the money to him, prompting him to wave them through and literally look the other way. It was another decision that would change the course of Fawad's life forever.

Fawad joined thousands of other refugees in Pakistan in hopes of a better future. However, life remained difficult. The civil war in Afghanistan showed no sign of ending and refugees continued to seek protection in great numbers. As a result, many were living in cramped conditions with little to no resources. For Fawad, this meant his first few years in Peshawar were spent sharing one house with five families. The lights would go out frequently, so the young students often had to study by lamp in a corner of the house.

Regardless of the obstacles and poor living arrangements, Fawad and his siblings focused all their energies on their education, as they knew it was the key to life outside of refugee camps. Differences in language and dialect were the primary areas of difficulty, so Fawad chose to enrol in an English course in addition to his other classes.

It was there he learned about the World University Services Canada's Student Refugee Sponsorship Program which gives refugees the opportunity to study in Canada. There were over 500 applicants when Fawad applied in 2000, but his dedication to his studies earned him a place at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Fawad had just two weeks to say good-bye to his family and learn everything he could about Canada. Of the moment he got the news, Fawad said, it felt like he "had achieved [his] goal. If I have this, I will have everything."

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Once he arrived in Canada, the learning experience started all over again as he began his journey towards integration. Every day was a new lesson—from learning how to dress, to deciphering social codes and different accents. He persevered and finished his bachelor's degree in 2006, along the way obtaining his Canadian citizenship in 2005. He says that the ceremony provided a great sense of belonging and was particularly important, as his friends from university took part as well.

Today Fawad is a university graduate, public servant, and community volunteer, work he describes as, “a chance to prove to everyone and to this country that you’ve given me a chance and now it’s my turn to give back.”

Reflecting on his experiences, he notes that despite facing a tumultuous time in one's life, one can overcome the odds through perseverance and courage. He says, “I want people to know that if I could do it, then you can too”.

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